

IN THE CLAIMS:

1. (Previously Presented) A bulky sheet material having three-dimensional protrusions comprising a first layer and a second layer adjacent to the first layer, said first layer and said second layer being partly joined together at joints in a prescribed pattern, said first layer having a number of said protrusions which are located between said joints, said second layer comprising a material which exhibits elastomeric behavior, and said bulky sheet material exhibiting elastomeric behavior as a whole and breathability, and

wherein said second layer comprises a fiber aggregate comprising fibers which are made of a thermoplastic polymer and exhibit thermal shrinkability and elastomeric behavior, and said first layer comprises a fiber aggregate comprising fibers which are made of a thermoplastic polymer and have substantially no thermal shrinkability or do not shrink at or below the thermal shrinkage temperature of said fibers exhibiting thermal shrinkability,

said sheet having been heat-treated at or above a temperature at which thermal shrinkage of the fibers constituting the second layer is initiated, whereby said second layer shrinks to form said protrusions in said first layer.

2. (Original) The bulky sheet material according to claim 1, which has a basis weight of 20 to 200 g/m², an apparent density of 5 to 50 kg/m³ under a pressure of 0.4 cN/cm², and an apparent density of 20 to 130 kg/m³ under a pressure of 34.2 cN/cm².

3. (Original) The bulky sheet material according to claim 1, which has a recovery of 50% or more from 50% extension.

4. (Cancelled)

5. (Previously Presented) The bulky sheet material according to claim 1, wherein said second layer comprises a fiber aggregate comprising latent crimping fibers.

6. (Original) The bulky sheet material according to claim 1, wherein at least one of said first layer and said second layer has a large number of perforations.

7. (Currently Amended) An absorbent article comprised of a liquid-permable topsheet, a liquid-impermeable backsheet and an absorbent member interposed between said topsheet and said backsheet, wherein at least one of said ~~layers~~ topsheet, backsheet or absorbent member of said absorbent article is being comprised of said a bulky sheet material ~~of claim 1~~ having three-dimensional protrusions comprising a first layer and a second layer adjacent to the first layer, said first layer and said second layer being partly joined together at joints in a prescribed pattern, said first layer having a number of said protrusions which are located between said joints, said second layer comprising a material which exhibits elastomeric behavior, and said bulky sheet material exhibiting elastomeric behavior as a whole and breathability, and

wherein said second layer comprises a fiber aggregate comprising fibers which are made of a thermoplastic polymer and exhibit thermal shrinkability and elastomeric behavior, and said first layer comprises a fiber aggregate comprising fibers which are made of a thermoplastic polymer and have substantially no thermal shrinkability or do not shrink at or below the thermal shrinkage temperature of said fibers exhibiting thermal shrinkability,

said sheet having been heat-treated at or above a temperature at which thermal shrinkage of the fibers constituting the second layer is initiated, whereby said second layer shrinks to form said protrusions in said first layer.

8. (Currently Amended) A method of producing a bulky sheet material having three-dimensional protrusions according to claim 4 1 comprising the steps of:

carding fibers by a carding machine to form a carded web
that is a first layer,

superposing the first layer and a separately prepared second layer on each other,

joining together the first layer and the second layer in parts forming a prescribed pattern, and

heat-treating the joined sheets at or above a temperature at which fibers constituting the second layer exhibit thermal shrinkage, to thereby shrink the second layer, and form said protrusions on said first layer.

9. (Currently Amended) A bulky sheet material having three-dimensional protrusions comprising a first layer and a second layer adjacent to the first layer, said first layer and said second layer being partly joined together at joints in a predescribed pattern, said first layer being formed by carding and having a number of said protrusions filled with fibers which are located between said joints, said second layer comprising a material which exhibits elastomeric behavior, and said bulky sheet material exhibiting elastomeric behavior as a whole and breathability, wherein said second layer comprises a fiber aggregate comprising fibers which are made of a thermoplastic polymer and exhibit thermal shrinkability and elastomeric behavior, and said first layer comprises a fiber aggregate comprising fibers which are made of a thermoplastic polymer and have substantially no thermal shrinkability or do not shrink at or below the thermal shrinkage temperature of said fibers exhibiting thermal shrinkability, said sheet material having been heat shrunk at or above the temperature at which thermal shrinkage of the fibers constituting the second layer is initiated to provide said protrusions in the first layer.

10. (Previously Presented) The bulky sheet material of claim 1, wherein said fiber aggregate of said first and second layers is selected from the group consisting of a carded web, a nonwoven fabric, and a knitted fabric.

11. (New) An absorbent article comprised of a liquid-permable topsheet, a liquid-impermeable backsheet and an absorbent member interposed between said topsheet and said backsheet, wherein at least one of said topsheet, backsheet or absorbent member is comprised of said bulky sheet material of claim 5.

12. (New) The absorbent article of claim 11, wherein at least one of said topsheet or backsheet is comprised of said bulky sheet material.

13. (New) The absorbent article of claim 7, wherein at least said topsheet is comprised of said bulky sheet material.

14. (New) The absorbent article of claim 7, wherein at least said backsheet is comprised of said bulky sheet material.

15. (New) The absorbent article of claim 13, wherein said second layer of said bulky sheet material comprises a fiber aggregate comprising latent crimping fibers.

16. (New) The absorbent article of claim 14, wherein said second layer of said bulky sheet material comprises a fiber aggregate comprising latent crimping fibers.

17. (New) The absorbent article of claim 7, wherein said fiber aggregate of said first and second layers is selected from the group consisting of a carded web, a nonwoven fabric, and a knitted fabric.

18. (New) The absorbent article of claim 7, wherein said article is a sanitary napkin.

19. (New) The bulky sheet material according to claim 1, wherein said sheet material has a breathability in terms of Gurley air permeability of 0.6 sec/100 ml or less as measured in accordance with JIS P8117.

20. (New) The absorbent article according to claim 7, wherein said bulky sheet material has a breathability in terms of Gurley air permeability of 0.6 sec/100 ml or less as measured in accordance with JIS P8117.

21. (New) The absorbent article according to claim 7, wherein said bulky sheet material has a basis weight of 20 to 200 g/m², an apparent density of 5 to 50 kg/m³ under a pressure of 0.4 cN/cm², and an apparent density of 20 to 130 kg/m³ under a pressure of 34.2 cN/cm².

22. (New) The absorbent article according to claim 7, wherein said bulky sheet material has a recovery of 50% or more from 50% extension.

23. (New) The absorbent article according to claim 7, wherein said second layer comprises a fiber aggregate comprising latent crimping fibers.

24. (New) The absorbent article according to claim 7, wherein at least one of said first layer and said second layer has a large number of perforations.

25. (New) The bulky sheet material of claim 1, wherein said protrusions are hollow.

26. (New) The bulky sheet material of claim 1, wherein said protrusions are filled.

27. (New) The bulky sheet material of claim 7, wherein said article is a sanitary napkin.